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ABSTRACT

Technology has revolutionized communication in a multitude of ways, allowing greater access to distant locations and to persons previously unavailable or available in only limited manners. In a number of respects, innovations such as electronic mail, voice mail, and fax machines have simplified communication and saved individuals valuable time. However, these changes have also complicated human relations and pose problems that challenge traditional communication skills and demand new approaches to interpersonal relations. Problems involved with electronic and automated communication include staff resistance to receiving generic campus-wide electronic mail messages, the paralysis that can ensue when a computer network fails, misunderstandings resulting from hastily produced messages, and the possibility of becoming overwhelmed by the volume of messages received electronically. Common sense strategies to reduce the stress associated with technological workplace communications include the following: (1) use new communication tools selectively; (2) understand the pros and cons of the use of technology as a communication tool; (3) remain mindful of the need for the "human touch" in working with people; (4) demonstrate an understanding of human behavior by exhibiting sensitivity and modeling acceptable social behavior in communications; and (5) do not transmit any messages without having thoroughly thought through their value and potential impact. (MAB)

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STRATEGIES AND METHODOLOGIES FOR IMPROVING COMMUNICATIONS IN A RAPID PACED, COMPLEX, TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD

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Bill H. Lamb has served as the Director of the Writing, Literature and Media Communications program at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas since 1987. Prior to that appointment, he was both an English faculty member and Humanities Department Chair at Coffeyville Community College. He received his doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Kansas State University, his master's degree in English literature from Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas, and his bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Kansas. His most recent publications have focused on instruction methods, assessment, and evaluation. He is a Kansas Association of Teachers of English board member and holds an office in the local Phi Delta Kappa chapter. Since moving to Overland Park, he has been actively involved in a variety of community organizations and youth support groups.

In 1993, the National Community College Chair Academy selected Dr. Lamb as the Midwest Region Award Winner for Encouraging Teaching Excellence. That same year he completed a year-long professional certification program through the Institute for Academic Leadership Development sponsored by the NCCCA. In 1994 and 1995, Dr. Lamb co-facilitated a regional institute for the NCCCA in New York and Toronto and was a presenter at the Kansas City institute.

Marilyn D. Rhinehart is Assistant Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. Prior to assuming that position, she served as special assistant to the president in development of a college strategic plan and as division head for the Social Sciences Division at North Harris College in Houston, Texas. She also received both teacher excellence and college writing awards. She holds bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees in American history from the University of Houston and is the author of *A Way of Work and A Way of Life: Coal Mining in Thurber, Texas, 1888-1926*. She has co-authored a test item file and participated in a video development project for two newly-published college history texts.

In 1993, she completed a year-long professional certification program through the Institute for Academic Leadership Development sponsored by the National Community College Chair Academy and co-facilitated a regional Institute for the NCCCA at Guam Community College in 1994 and 1995 and in Wisconsin in 1995.

James M. Still is Chair of the Division of Lifelong Wellness at Delta College in Michigan. Prior to assuming the role of chair, the college awarded him the rank of Professor in the division. Throughout his career at Delta College, he has been active in college governance activities and has held a number of leadership positions, including Senate President, Chair of the Teaching Faculty, and President of the college's chapter of the American Association of University Professors. He also directed two tax referendum campaigns for the college. He received his doctorate in college and university administration at Michigan State University in 1995, focusing his work on the impact of training on community college chairs' leadership behavior.

Dr. Still is a 1993 graduate of the Institute for Academic Leadership Development established by the National Community Chair Academy and was selected to serve as an Institute facilitator at Gum Community College in 1994 and 1995.

"Strategies and Methodologies for Improving Communications in a Rapid-Paced, Complex Technological World"

Technology has revolutionized communication in a multitude of ways, allowing greater access to distant locations and to persons whose connection to us would have been unheard of or at best limited only a few years ago. Using electronic and voice mail and fax machines, delivery of information is practically instantaneous. In a number of respects such innovations have simplified communication and saved valuable time; however, these changes also have complicated human relations and posed problems that challenge traditional communication skills and demand new approaches to interpersonal relations. So complex has the work environment become that we often feel we are prisoners of technology (especially when the network goes down) and the perpetrators and victims of an increasingly depersonalized world. In education this is especially challenging to those who must guide, counsel, evaluate, organize, administer, manage, and lead.

Examples of the difficulties inherent in communication these days abound.

- A member of a department's support staff sent an electronic mail message to all employees at the college to announce an upcoming symposium. This seemed an efficient, quick, and inexpensive way to communicate with many. Not all agreed. One recipient took the time to write a blunt response. "I am not interested in this type of communication." Receipt of this message ruined the staff member's day and resulted in a waste of considerable time as she fumed and plotted her own response.

- An institution's new scheduling software put called meetings on group members' calendars without asking them. "I'm tired of a machine setting my schedule for me," one person groused.

- The Admissions Office sent a voice mail message campus-wide every day during registration reminding staff of the day's events. Increasingly, the moment recipients heard the name of the person sending the message, they deleted it. They refused to listen to any information from that caller. One group in an office suite even designated a daily "listener," who communicated the message to everyone. It was easy for the message to become distorted as it was passed from one person to another.

- As an administrative team prepared for a board meeting deadline and faculty rushed to complete course information at the beginning of the semester, the network "went down." The institution faced practical paralysis and stress levels escalated. Registration came to a virtual halt when overloaded phone lines sent the

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system into distress. Lines got longer, tempers flared, and the director of technology gave up trying to explain the problem.

- A supervisor misinterpreted a note written in haste and in a fit of pique wrote an immediate response via electronic mail that five minutes later he reconsidered. It didn't matter. The message could not be "unsent."

- A faculty member sent a message campus-wide that was intended to be funny. Some people didn't realize that. They thought the sender was serious, and a "joke" assumed unintended serious proportions.

- Faculty members who had not yet been connected to electronic mail and the Internet began to feel left out and "classified" as the unskilled as they observed their colleagues communicate with one another and persons across the world. A new "clique" had developed out of the simple effort to speed communication. Until everyone had access, it created some ill-will.

- A faculty member rarely saw her department head. She communicated almost totally by voice or electronic mail. It became increasingly easy to criticize her—the faculty member no longer felt a connection to the "boss." A depersonalized workplace became a sniping workplace.

- A chronic electronic mail user sent a voice mail message to a colleague asking her to read her e-mail to get a very important message. This seemed to be the epitome of reliance on alternate methods of communication.

- An administrator returned from a week on professional leave and found over one hundred electronic mail messages on her computer. He immediately felt overwhelmed, and it took him a week to plow through all the messages. In the meantime, he missed two meetings because the announcements were buried in the middle of all the other messages. Those "senders" had not used the scheduling software to get on his schedule.

- An administrator became obsessed with reading and responding to her e-mail the first thing each morning. The sound of the "ding" sent her racing to the machine for the latest message. She found herself wrapped up in electronic mail all morning, letting other tasks pile up. Another e-mail user rarely answered all of his e-mail--the sending may have been speedy but the response was anything but that. Those who never received a response concluded that they just weren't important enough to warrant even a brief reply.

Each of the scenarios noted above and countless others that occur everyday demonstrate the special complications that technology has created in communication efforts--always a sensitive issue in educational institutions. Leaders must be excellent communicators, and today that requires a special awareness and set of skills to balance

speed and seeming efficiency with the need for a personal connection with colleagues. The use of technology has changed the rules of communication but it need not remove the opportunity to apply those skills that have traditionally worked well.

There are many types of communication required in everyday operations at educational institutions. Information must be shared, problems must be solved, teams must be built, meetings must be conducted, and one-on-one discussions must occur. Technology can make such communication easier and faster. However, it can be a vehicle for excessive one-way, top-down communication where feedback is not direct or immediate. These problems are as important in relationships with students as with colleagues.

- Lacking face-to-face exchanges which allow the "sender" of the message to see the "receiver's" reaction--apprehension, confusion, acceptance--there is a greater opportunity for misunderstanding.

- A desire for speed may mean that we do not take the time to think about what we are writing and sending into cyberspace, so correspondence may lack evidence of sound reflection and lack clarity and the application of good grammatical skills.

- Long-winded voice mail messages that ramble may suggest to the recipient that the sender's thought processes are not working very well--whether that is the reality or not.

- There is a security issue; in the wrong hands, an electronic message can wreak havoc.

- Although messages may be speedy to send, this does not mean that the recipient will be speedy in reading and responding to them.

- Recipients may view e-mail and voice mail as invasions of their privacy. They can get angry at the sender and the vehicle for sending the message. "What has the computer done to me today?"

- The opportunity to apply good listening skills may be diminished (such as paraphrasing to see if one understands what is being said).

- Downward and directive-type communication may increase.

- Shifts can easily occur in the chain of command, since it is as easy as typing in a name or picking up the phone to communicate with anyone in an organization.

- Message overload can take place with the result that no one reads or listens to any communication thus creating the perception if not the reality of a communication gap.

- Information is power. Those with technological capability can become part of a new power structure. This is unsettling.

- New debates and discussions will develop. What type of messages are most appropriate for electronic or voice mail delivery? What guidelines for use are required? What restrictions may an institution place on its use or requirements for its use?

For all who must increasingly rely on technology (and few of us actually are Luddites who want to see all machinery destroyed anyway--we do appreciate the benefits of technology), some simple adaptations are in order. Certainly face-to-face communication remains the most powerful tool to "repersonalize" a department, a work area, or an institution. It's much more difficult to hide the truth or feelings when working with someone on a one-on-one basis. However, that is often impossible or impractical.

What "common sense" strategies can reduce the stress of working in an environment where the rapid pace and presence of technology complicate efforts to build and maintain trust and efficient day-to-day operations as well as communicate values and a vision for the future?

1. Be selective about how the new communication tools designed to save time and to improve efficiency are used.

2. Understand the pros and cons of the use of technology as a communication tool.

3. Remain mindful of basic communication theory and the need for the "human touch" in working with people.

4. Demonstrate an understanding of human behavior--show empathy and sensitivity, persuade without offending, speak and write fluently, and encourage cooperation by modeling acceptable social behavior (tact, diplomacy, effective listening, consideration for others). This should occur in all types of communication.

5. **Don't push the "send" button until you've had plenty of time to think about it!!**